

**Reincarnation: A Critical Examination**, by Paul Edwards. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996. 313 pp., \$28.95 (c) ISBN 1573920053 TC.

What amazes me about such people is their smug dogmatism and their colossal arrogance. They "know," and are completely certain of things that cannot be known, and their "knowledge" is not harmless because it is made the basis for vicious conduct. To such fanatics one can only quote the words (suitably adjusted) of Oliver Cromwell in a letter he wrote to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland: "I beseech you, in the bowels of Gautama, think it possible you may be mistaken." (p. 46)

Edwards, in the above passage, is referring to philosophers sympathetic to the concept of karma, but it is tempting to read it as referring to himself and others of skeptical inclination. The very qualities he laments are clearly on display in his book, and the bastardized quotation from Cromwell could properly be addressed to many skeptics as well.

*Reincarnation: A Critical Examination* is a much expanded version of a series of articles that appeared in the humanist journal, *Free Inquiry*, in 1986 and 1987. It contains 17 chapters and an "Irreverent Postscript" that deals with "God and the *Modus Operandi* Problem." Although the relevance of the postscript to the rest of the book is not altogether clear, Edwards appears to mean it to underscore what he sees as the central problem with the idea of survival after death. This is the difficulty of specifying exactly how survival occurs, especially given the amount of data from biology and the brain sciences that seems to weigh against it.

The 17 chapters that form the body of the book cover a variety of topics directly or indirectly related to reincarnation — among them karma, cases (child prodigies, *e.g.*) sometimes thought to be explicable in terms of reincarnation, past-life regressions (a chapter is devoted to Bridey Murphy), "future-life progressions," spontaneous past life memories, the "astral body," out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, deathbed visions, reports by Stanislav Grof of past life memories under LSD, reports of memories of the period between lives (called the "interregnum" by Edwards), and finally the work of Ian Stevenson.

Reincarnation logically entails some form of survival, so it is appropriate that a book dealing with reincarnation (especially one with philosophical pretensions) treat the survival problem more generally. Many readers, however, may wonder about the amount of space given to out-of-body and near-death experiences. They may also be disappointed to find serious reincarnation research of the sort associated with Ian Stevenson given such short shrift. Stevenson receives most of one chapter and a small portion of a second, for a total of about 30 pages. This compares to 38 pages devoted to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and 27 pages devoted to Stanislav Grof.

The book is replete with footnotes and index (although it lacks a bibliogra-

phy or reference list), and appears at first glance to be exhaustively researched. However, a closer look at sources is revealing. Edwards has a decided tendency to prefer popular treatments, especially skeptical ones. Astonishingly little is cited from scientific journals or scholarly books, and when cited, the references are sometimes incorrect. Edwards' seeming uncertainty about the title of the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* is emblematic of his difficulties here. In the text on p. 243 the journal is called the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases*, whereas in a footnote on the same page it is identified as the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorders*.

The reluctance to engage primary source material may be part of the reason for important omissions. Apparitions and mediumship, both with considerable literatures of their own but with much more direct relevance to the survival problem than out-of-body and near-death experiences, are hardly mentioned. There is no mention of the now considerable number of statistical and cross-cultural studies of children who remember previous lives, or of the patterns that have emerged from such studies. Several important theoretical and philosophical approaches to explaining survival and reincarnation are ignored. Xenoglossy (the use of unlearned language) is acknowledged but exempted from treatment, with a reference to an article in the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

Edwards frequently cites the views of fellow skeptics, but does not attempt to address the responses of survival researchers, even when these are available to him. For instance, he references my 1990 review of reincarnation research (Matlock, 1990), which deals with all of the issues cited in the last paragraph, and which includes detailed rebuttals to a number of critical comments on Stevenson's research. However, not only does Edwards fail to take note of my comments, he ignores them and trots out many of the same tired arguments.

At times, Edwards seems not to grasp the relevant issues. What is wrong with the "dreariness" of Virginia Tighe's memories as Bridey Murphy? (p. 62). Their very dreariness suggests their authenticity more than a dramatic account would. In discussing a spontaneous child case from India, Edwards wonders whether the word for "prostitute" would be known to children in India (p. 257). Probably not — but perhaps the child recalled the word in association with the past life memories he was describing. Edwards writes (p. 269) that "Stevenson assumes" that the previous personalities of Western subjects also lived in the West. However, this is not an assumption on Stevenson's part, but a conclusion based on the characteristics of cases he has investigated.

There are several outright mistakes, which betray a less than sure grasp of the relevant literature and personalities. Although Osiris and Haraldsson have written a book about deathbed visions, they do not "specialize" in their study (p. 8). (Indeed, as readers of this Journal know, Haraldsson has lately taken up the study of children who remember previous lives.) Edwards states that a movie based on *The Search for Bridey Murphy* was never made (p. 61), whereas one was released by Paramount in 1956 (and is now available on home video). He states that Stevenson has never investigated a hypnotic regression

case (p. 102), an error he would have been able to correct had he taken the trouble to review the xenoglossy literature. He claims that "birthmarks are cited as evidence only among some of the cultures in which reincarnation is prevalent" (p. 138), thereby overlooking (among many other cases) the English Pollock twins discussed in at least three of the works he cites.

The tone of the book often is condescending. Edwards repeatedly expresses "joy" (e.g., p. 89, 140) and congratulates himself on having an "irrepressible Voltairean sense of humor" (p. 9). An example of this presumably is his allusion to the "bowels of Gautama" cited above. Here is another sample: "It is widely believed that the poet Edith Sitwell was a flamingo in an earlier life and there cannot be a serious doubt that Winston Churchill had once been a bulldog.... As for Marlene Dietrich, the general consensus now is that she was once an emu. There seems to be no other way of explaining her treatment of her daughter, Maria Riva" (p. 12-13).

Edwards is not beyond putting others down, sometimes to the point of slander. "I cannot rid myself of the suspicion that the brilliant thinker quoted here is none other than Bernstein himself" (p. 64). Of Raymond Moody he writes, "the suspicion is that he has fudged his data so that the cases would exhibit a far higher degree of similarity than what was actually reported" (p. 153). Of Alexander Cannon, "I cannot decide whether Cannon was mad or a fraud. It is possible that he was both, with madness predominating" (p. 83).

As philosophy, the book is disappointing. Edwards mostly rehearses the arguments of others, makes few original points, and does not closely examine any issue. Moreover, his bias sometimes leads him into circular arguments. For example, since he dismisses the possibility of an "astral body," he can say of birthmarks in reincarnation cases that there is "no conceivable way" that a wound could be transmitted from a dead person to an embryo (p. 139). Again, "the absence of genuine memories of previous lives" are said to constitute "powerful evidence *against* reincarnation" (p. 27, italics in original), whereas reports of such memories are dismissed partly because they imply reincarnation.

Edwards is not at all sympathetic to the possibility that there are limitations to the scientific world view to which he adheres. "Reincarnationists, at least those who know a little science," he tells us, "constantly look for gaps in existing scientific explanations, which reincarnation is then supposed to fill" (p. 56). It is not clear, at least to this reviewer, why this is such a bad strategy — if we are not willing to dismiss empirical evidence, as Edwards is, what more likely place to look for explanation than in the gaps in mainstream scientific knowledge? At one point he notes that "Stevenson, too, does not accept this argument [on *déjà vu*] but, as is usual with him in the cases of arguments he finds inadequate, he sees some significant merits in it" (p. 52). This is something Edwards cannot (or will not) do. The world appears to him in black and white, never shades of gray.

Who is this book for? Edwards spends much time on issues to which no seri-

ous researcher gives much attention (Kibler-Ross, Grof), and does not deal at all adequately with the more important scholarly literature, so serious researchers will find little of value here. Another potential audience is the large popular audience drawn to subjects like reincarnation. This presumably is the target audience, but readers expecting an even-handed, if critical, treatment of the subject matter will be disappointed, and I suspect that many will be put off by the unrelenting skepticism, put-downs, and outright dismissals. This leaves the like-minded skeptic, the reader already committed to Edwards' point of view. This reader is likely to find a great deal of interest in this book. Such a reader is likely to enjoy Edwards' writing style, his treatment of other authors, his minute dissection of many of the more vacuous writings on survival, and to come away from this book all the more deeply convinced that he or she is right.

### Reference

Matlock, J. G. (1990). Past life memory case studies. In S. Krippner (Ed.), *Advances in Parapsychological Research*. McFarland: Jefferson, NC, Vol. 6, p. 187-267.

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**Forming Concepts in Physics**, by Georg Unger, Parker Courtney Press of the Science and Mathematics Association for Research and Teaching, 307 Hungry Hollow Road, Chestnut Ridge, NY 10977, \$24.75.

Georg Unger's book, *Forming Concepts in Physics*, is a seminal study of the conceptual foundations of modern science of quantum mechanics, probability and relativity theory, and mathematics. Central to the book is an examination of the role of thinking in gaining physical knowledge. Unger focuses on the transition from classical to modern physics to suggest what will be a radical shift in consciousness for most readers. Unger shows that, far from passive observing, scientists employ active thinking to gain access to the world of phenomena. In other words, seeing employs thinking in order to organize sense data into coherent experience. Reality is in this coherent experience of phenomena and does not lie in a metaphysical world behind experience. In this phenomenological analysis, thought is taken to bring reality to existence within human beings.

In a careful and insightful analysis, Unger discusses in detail what actually happened in the transition to Twentieth Century physics. Of particular importance in this regard is Unger's treatment of the concept of matter. Unger formulates the concept of matter as the togetherness or simultaneous appearance of sense qualities. It follows from such an understanding that the boundaries of sense reality are reached when the condition of such togetherness is no